

Dogs from your childhood  
& other unrealities

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*To N, who no longer knows me;  
to K, who is still a friend to me after everything;  
& to H, who has improved my life considerably.*

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## Foreword

I am, like most people, a terrible spendthrift of the fleeting mysteries with which I am so foolishly entrusted. Here I have saved a few of these & attempt to share them with those whose lives are tragically characterized by certainty & easy understanding.

—*D. Cyprès*

# Chapter 1

## Places that aren't

## The go-kart track

Later, the thing he would remember best about that summer was that bright afternoon hour when they had the parked the car at a roadside go-kart track in the middle of the marshes, paid the attendant to fill the carts with strong-smelling petrol from a can & explain the controls, & rode around the track until the fuel was spent. She sped, but he kept a pace neither fast nor slow, but merely moderate, imagining all the while that he was Tintin taking in the Walloon countryside.

In the succeeding years he would try again & again to find the track, but he could not remember the number of the road they'd been on, & the locals could only direct him to a gaudy amusement park on the boardwalk.

They had been the only customers there. The sun had warmed his nose, the top of his head. There had been clouds like in his favorite works of Magritte. And nothing had happened apart from the monotonous looping of the carts around the track. It was funny, he would later think, that of those times he best remembered this least eventful hour. All the same, he was grateful, for they had always been happiest together when nothing happened.



## Tintin in the land of Anne Sexton

You tried to be Anne Sexton in the land of Anne Sexton, but she had already conquered Massachusetts, so now you re-enter her territory as the visiting foreigner, the wide-eyed Walloon, the cartoon boy scout Tintin. Firstly, you shall schedule your visit for the summer, knowing that a New England winter will either make you stick your head in an oven like Plath or turn you into another one of these anonymous junkies skulking under the vacant gaze of stone Madonnas. You'll have none of that; you shall leave once you've seen the trees ablaze with the embers of early autumn.

You shall arm yourself; you shall bring your adorable fox terrier & your unassuming beige trench coat. You are the cartoon boy scout Tintin, whose name is the clinking of glasses, & you shall carry a spiral-bound notebook & a few good pencils; no tendrils of black ink shall crawl up your arms to clutch at your heart as they did in the melodramatic times when you tried to be Anne Sexton. You shall hold no memory of your Anne Sexton childhood—or if you do, you shall imagine that the whole of it occurred during that week when the spring floods created an impassable moat around your school, & the stone Madonna that watched its gate was as untouchable as her heavenly counterpart.

You shall need an adventure befitting Tintin the cartoon boy scout journalist. You can try the old stand-by: busting another drug smugglers' ring. You shall win the admiration of all the mothers in the five-family homes of these pothole-laden mill towns, vigilant women whose back doors bear signs

reading “*Diga sí a Jesucristo, no a las drogas.*” You shall dine on pork tamales at the Café Azteca, then take the commuter rail to Boston for a visit to the Bull & Finch & be back to Brussels before first frost.

## Dogs from your childhood

You were trying to remember dogs from your childhood, so, being unemployed, you had an old friend take you out of the city to your hometown for a day. You saw the lot where they'd torn down the Golden Cue, where they wouldn't let you in to see your father because Fred was following you, growling low. You saw the dark marks on the playground tar where a slide had stood, the one on which you sat when your mother came by to pick you up on her day off, walking your first dog Levi for the first time. You saw flecks of paint where the crosswalk had been, the one in which you stood when Maya was hit by a truck chasing a stray ball, her tail in all directions.

But the angle of the intersection is not quite right, because this is not your hometown. And the dogs change colors in your mind until it occurs to you that you probably had none; you think you are allergic to them. The friend who brought you here is a beat-up Maxima you hardly remember buying. You are proud of all this letting go. You know when you have finished it will be like looking through a stranger's baby pictures. You are looking forward to losing it all.

## Light & *saudade*

Okay, here are the rules: the game will begin at some unimportant moment. You will probably heading down the stairwell, about to go home. You will find that you have lost track of the days you had marked by the shift & shimmer of the light & the longing. You used to wake up every Wednesday thinking *This is my Wednesday*, but the forgetting took hold, & it became first *This is Wednesday* & now simply *This is*. As you stand, your every movement suddenly arrested, in the stairwell (or wherever you happen to be when the game begins) you will try desperately to remember what kind of person you are, or have been, or could be, or whether you can properly be called a person at all.

The objective is to end up somewhere you have no reason to be, a place where you are entirely irrelevant. You will proceed directly to the nearest subway station. You may enter a coffee shop on the way, but you must at least forget to take your coffee, or to take your change, or to buy anything altogether. If you have the presence of mind to buy a small mocha without incident, you are not playing the game correctly. You will board a Manhattan-bound R train. You must not disembark until you reach Whitehall Street. There you must board a ferry, because there is no way in hell you belong on Staten Island. For good measure, you must board the train on Staten Island, & ride all the way to Tottenville. You may not call anyone. You may not transmit any meaningful communication. No one may know where you are going. You may not speak. You may not sign. Even a nod would be pushing it, really.

And at Tottenville you will wander onto the beach, braving the nighttime beachflies, & bury yourself in the sand.

I lost the game. I got off at Canal Street, walked east to one of the dollar dumpling houses on Eldridge Street, & ate my pork & chive dumplings in the dark on a park bench while a wheezing man in a suit made of garbage bags hovered over me. I called my mother & wished her a happy birthday. You will need to have more determination.

*Late Spring*

In small ways my life is becoming like a film by Ozu. A moth sleepily follows the current of fluorescence over a platform littered with Sunday's unhurried passengers. When the train is far away, it is only a few colored lights, slowly shrinking or growing as they please.

## To Mr. Sugarfree Red Bull

You really should see this place. It's far from your publisher, yes, & not nearly as prestigious as Europe, but the houses are so small & soft & old, & the trees between them grow unruly & sway tired drunken, & their little white seed-tufts are suspended in the air. The sun is shining & this goes on & on for miles until you must get out of the car & sway tired drunken with the trees, drinking & drinking of the sun, of the breeze, of the whirring of children's bicycle tires.

## Geometries

Let us compare geometries. This is the architecture of my longing. A rectangular prism of brick or concrete is studded with windows & balconies & left to dry in the sun; this happens regularly both in New York & in Pyongyang. In the Capitalist West & in the Red East instant coffee is being served to connoisseurs of the angles of sunlight that pass through the windows of an office building. See this man? He has a secret. No one knows it is his birthday. When nobody is looking he lets the sunlight carry him to the summit of Kūmgangsan. He lies there in all his dreams. He has spilled some Nescafé on his shirt. A cluster of rectangular prisms stands impossibly & comically stock-still as ships & winds & trains & water pass unnoticed. When the sun's angles have shifted people move from one rectangular prism to the other in solemn procession. In Pyongyang all the lights go out. In New York they burn desperately all night. On the summit of Kūmgangsan there are no lights.



## The *dacha*

His *dacha*—that is, the *dacha* belonging to some distant relative whose name & coordinates in the family tree he cannot recall, the *dacha* in which he lives now & which we shall call *his dacha*—contains a clock which never shows the correct time of day, a calendar fashioned of engraved wooden slats that never displays the correct day of the month, & a television with long antennae which requires energy from the petrol-driven generator to run & therefore has been run only once during his stay, when his father visited & demanded to watch the Olympic Games. His father was enthralled with the speed swimming events, while he himself enjoyed only the synchronized diving.

Every dive was a perfect drama. For example: Two men from the Ukraine step onto the boards. They were archenemies in grade school but are now so involved in each other's lives that they are always to be found in the same town & usually in the same room. They have, in the name of discipline, taken to eating their food, brushing their teeth, & reading their favorite books with perfectly synchronized & symmetrical movements. As the *dacha* dweller watches them take a series of synchronized breaths & blink a few nervous, synchronized blinks he explains their strange personal history to his father. It has not been explained by the announcers & was, in fact, completely an invention of his, but it feels about as true as anything said by the voices coming from the television. The divers step forward—*one, two, three*—in perfect unison. They do not have to try to match each other any longer, for they have mastered their art so perfectly that

they have become irrevocably attached by a force analogous to invisible strings or quantum entanglement. They bounce as one—*up, down, up, down, up*—& hurl themselves into a flawless twisting somersault before tucking into the water as if into a gigantic hotel bed. They lose to the Chinese, who are doubtlessly one person performing an act of bilocation.

Since the departure of his father & the closing of the Games, the *dacha* dweller has forgotten the day of the week, the name of the month. Occasionally he rides his bicycle five miles to the nearest store for a newspaper so he can be sure what year it is, as he is no longer possessed of any confidence in the general linearity of time. The only thing time is reliable for now is brewing a cup of tea; he times this with such precision now he considers himself a leading expert in the field.

Every now & then old Sasha drives by in his truck, holding an antenna out the window, fishing for a signal from the distant towers so he can call his daughter. He asks the *dacha* dweller, “Reception good here?”

The *dacha* dweller replies, “Perfect. None at all.”

## Eviction

It seems nobody ever washes the orange tiles that line the walls in the underground portion of Port Authority Bus Terminal. The waiting area is full up with people in heavy clothing. Each except me has a pile of things rendered in such uniformly mottled tones I cannot distinguish one from another to identify what they are. I am the only one of us awake. Maybe the others are all furiously dreaming me & this whole place into existence.

Two NYPD officers abruptly stride into this sanctuary from nowhere.

“Alright! Wake up, everyone!” one of them half-shouts. “You know the drill. Show us a ticket or leave.”

Within a minute the dreamers have all dispersed, bundles in tow, leaving me alone in their dormitory. As the last to leave hurries away, a book falls from her grip & clatters to the floor. It is of the same mottled tone as everything else & I cannot discern its title. She cannot stop to pick it up. She does not need to look back to know the police are staring her down.

A couple hours later my bus arrives to conduct me into the dawn.

## A kingdom of illuminated porches

On the night of Halloween the boy was allowed a much greater degree of mysticism than usual. What was only a cozy housing development blanketed in brittle leaves by day became at night an unfathomable kingdom of illuminated porches. He plodded around street corners made unfamiliar by the dark with his father until the string of porch-lights was broken abruptly. A line of costumed children & their bemused parents were standing there at the edge of the woods contemplating the blood-red hue of the moon. Among them was the boy's only friend. They looked each other in the eye for a moment; somehow his friend knew him even under that Roswell alien mask. Frightened, & made to look frail by her pale vampire makeup, her rubber fangs somehow more tragic than menacing, she turned away to face a shadow that hovered over the forest where the mountain appeared by day. The boy's breath was trapped against his face in the plastic mask, fogging the transparent bulges over his eyes. The mountain spoke his name in a low whisper. He fell to the ground, shuddering.

# Chapter 2

People who never were

## A small menagerie of sidekicks

My friends are all heroes; to befriend me is an act of heroism. My role models, therefore, form a small menagerie of sidekicks.

### Zhang Chongren

When we were children, my closest friends called me Walrus, because we knew each other in the secret language of children. They were my friends in years of glorious possibility, when we imagined that we would one day be paid to talk like philosophers.

The Wallonian Hergé knew you as Tchang Chong-chen, because he knew you in French. You were his friend in the Interwar years, when travel of all sorts was possible, when one could be paid to make art in China.

You were Catholics, the two of you, & thus thought of each other as brothers-in-Christ. When you were together you laughed like children. And so in Hergé's comics you became brothers, you became children. Tintin, whose name is the clinking of glasses. Tchang, the orphan child who accompanies Tintin on his glorious adventures in China, spies for him, crouches waiting in an oversized Ming vase.

But Tintin went home, & so did you. The Nazis took Belgium, the Red Guard China. For a house, for yuan, you swept streets. No word could reach Europe.

When the shadow of divorce eclipsed his days, when his dreams had him dying in avalanches of blank white paper, he sent Tintin to the Himalayas to look for you. For you were in the dreams, crying out, nobly suffering your injuries in the wreckage of an airliner, at once terrifying & seductive, as was the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian to a young Yukio Mishima.<sup>1</sup> And when you were finally found you said your only thoughts of the world beyond had been of your dear Wallonian friend. Like Rochester calling Jane Eyre with his pure desire.

And yet for years, outside the comics, you remained unfound.

## Brian Epstein

Always content with being the fifth man in a foursome, a gay man in straight Liverpool, you were the man who made us listen to the Beatles when we wouldn't, when Decca said guitar bands were "on their way out." It was you who took all of John's worst jokes, who—though he told you to call your biography *Queer Jew*<sup>2</sup>—whisked him away to Barcelona for a few days when he was on the brink.

I shall refrain from analogizing here, as I know not whether to cast myself as Lennon or as Epstein. Or maybe I am off meditating with George Harrison.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mishima himself made no bones about divulging this sort of information. As filmmaker Paul Schrader will attest, however, his widow would make no bones about setting the yakuza on me.

<sup>2</sup>And when you settled on *A Cellarfull of Noise*, he called it *A Cellarfull of Boys*.

<sup>3</sup>George & I share a birthday, after all.

## Alberto Granado

It was dark. I thought perhaps it was him emerging from the night on the sidewalk there. It was. There were hellos. He took the other street. I lost track. It was dark. You know, señor Granado. You & another man once rode on the same motorcycle & each thought, I know what he's thinking right now. I know what we must do after this. That is a joke. This is the punchline: you became a scientist; he commanded a Cuban army.

Some of us wear shirts bearing a great man's face, call him Che like we know him, though we have money enough to buy all the cannabis we could ever want, though for the money we spent on our Che shirts somebody could feed her children. Some of us, however, are the grand, the great men. Some of us are Che. And some of us are the good men who watch the great men careen off down the other street. I thought we were talking about the same thing, we think, watching the great men go off to die. Shot in the legs, the arms, the chest, the throat. Stabbed in the head with an ice pick.<sup>4</sup> Whatever they've come up with this time.

Two good friends are on a train. One of them gets off at the station, & the other, astonished, catches a glimpse of him on the platform through the window as the train rolls away. That is a joke. We are the punchline.

It was bright, for a time. Always is, for a time. We had plans. They diverged. It was dark.

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<sup>4</sup>I am aware that was Trotsky. You may lecture me anyway.



## To a comrade lost

You were an enlisted man & I a conscript in the uncut grasses swaying uncertainly beyond the limits of our neighborhood. I died for you several times, begged you to take my rifle & fend for yourself as I dove upon the hollow plastic grenade. Your father would let us take a can of Pepsi each from the cooler in the basement & these served as our D-rations. My memento from home was an issue of *Shonen Jump* you bought me because I had no pocket money, & yours some novel you were too young to read—*The Brothers Karamazov* or *Le Fantôme de L'Opéra* or *Les Misérables*. Our radio set was an old cassette recorder with a tape of Simon & Garfunkel's concert in Central Park, our Axis Powers the relentless cicadas. Still too young to be sure what it entailed, I said sex sounded like more of a bother than it was worth. You didn't sound too excited about it yourself.

The last time I saw you, forced to retreat to my family in their laden minivan throbbing waiting in Eliot's violet hour, the enemy had the upper hand; their drone pushed your helmet low. You hardly glanced in my direction as I left, nor did you seem sad to see me go. The last time I heard from you, in your first letter in years, the hormone therapy had made you sick. The last time I asked about you, you had moved to Kenosha, Wisconsin. I can only hope that you are less alone than I.

I would die to die for you again.

## “Tenuousness”

You replay the Andrew Bird video. In it he stands in a vast, dark, velvet-lined room, making frenetic pizzicato on his violin, as some electronic gadgetry at his feet (which are in pointed, American flag-colored, patent leather shoes) sustains a cascading echo, so that each measure is heaped upon the last & repeated again as he continues to pick away, & you can tell from the tics of his head that he knows every note before it plays. He ices it over with long, gliding arco, then quickly switches to the electric guitar slung around his neck & whistles like the freak of nature, the songbird he is. The only visible audience are three dim, sedate listeners who lounge on dim, yellow couches around a dim table bearing dim & empty wine glasses. You have recreated this dimness in my own room, but without the couches & wine glasses, for tonight you are possessed of or by the most bitter of longings, one you cannot sate with vending machine Pop-Tarts though it seems to reside somewhere in the region of your stomach. You want something & you want it nearly to the point of tears, but what it is you would be hard-pressed to say. Is this when you should, like Augustine, peer inside yourself for the mark of God your maker? You imagine this to look something like the barely legible stamp on the bottom of a clay vase on The Antiques Roadshow. You imagine that if you get in line early enough some appraiser might take the time to point it out: “If you’ll just direct your attention here for a moment, you’ll notice. . .”

You need sleep, & need it more strongly than usual, but you’ve an urge to watch Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* again, because

you know it may be the only film you've seen that's really honest about romance. Right now it's important to have a realistic outlook on this sort of thing, because if you're not lusting for God than perhaps you are meant to be lusting for someone else. But maybe you don't need to watch *Solaris* to remind me what it feels like to love a girl who always wants to fuck you, or to die. To fuck you, because she can't imagine how anything else could make her feel right & at home & forever happy. To die, because she cannot always have you in her bed. To die, because you are not the towering Olympian god she makes of you. You are wondering why you never want to fuck anyone back.

You are not doing my work tonight. You feel fifty miles away from your papers, the laundry—fifty miles underground, or fifty miles in the air, you don't know. You want to want to wander about outside, screaming soberly at the stars you can't see for all the city lights filling the air. You want to sleep in the bath, to escape the tyranny of the softness. But you will sleep in the bed as usual tonight, & wake up tired again tomorrow morning, knowing for a time that you merely want breakfast.

## The bat

I am in the business of collecting visions. Some business! I generally go unpaid. And such hazards. Sometimes, when one tries to possess a vision, the vision possesses instead. The other night I passed an open door & saw my young brother sleeping in the yellow glow of his closet light as a soot-black bat circled over his head again & again, weaving a charm, or a curse, or perhaps just looking for a place to roost.

For some days I did not remember, but the *flap-flap-flap-flap* in my head persisted until two days ago, when this vision tumbled out into my lap. And only just now have I seen what possessed me so: a question—was it the bat casting spells in the night, or my young brother?

## Sunday best

I am well-dressed this morning & carrying a little bag of shit. The dog I am walking is a real dog impersonating a cartoon dog. Usually this works the other way around, & given this dog's utter failure to reverse the way of things, I can see why. "Now, Clifford," I say to him, "the way you ate that empty chocolate wrapper was far too realistic." We cross a sidewalk obstacle course of empty miniature plastic bottles with names like Bacardi & Tanqueray. Nobody knows it yet, but the dog will be dead in a few days.

## Stranded on 12<sup>th</sup> Street

The air mattress is calm, though burdened. He entertains your sweet worthy impossible dreams, tells you you're right to be afraid. He explains Nietzsche, Kierkegaard in whispers as you try to sleep. He reminds you how small you are, makes your restlessness less acute.

He does these things before you can ask. You are sorry the words do not come. You are used to being a stranger. He saw that you were still wearing your hat though you had long been in from the cold. It is on a chair in the kitchen now, & his binder is draped over a cabinet.

His shoulders complain. He turns & turns. You want very much to wrap your arms around him, to be another blanket against the cold of night, but for now you refrain. Outside, the drunkards have finally gone home. Perhaps you look funny together—he a massive soul in a tiny aching frame, you a hulking stocky sort of person with hair that dances about your ears & a heart always shivering uncertainly. The warmth of his being beside you nourishes. You sleep deeply, & in the morning you do not want to leave. Is it wrong, you wonder, that you want this every night?

You have this in common—you are just boys after all, & too thoughtful for your own good.

## Transit

*Transit* is Latin for *it passes*.

Once, at three o'clock in the morning on a subway platform at Washington Square, I met person dressed head-to-toe in a suit fashioned from plastic trash bags & duct tape.

"Excuse me," he began. His voice was friendly, but I was wary of any stranger who would approach me on a subway platform. "Can I trouble you for a quarter?" He waited patiently as I fished around in my pocket for maybe two minutes, then held out a hand to accept the coin when I finally found it. "Thanks," he said. His plastic clothing rustled as he walked away.

Once, in the same subway station & in much the same situation, but on another night & a different platform, I sat weary on a hard wooden bench for half an hour waiting for a train. The silent commuter at the other end of the bench was the only other person in sight until someone waddled out from behind a stairway, slowly, deliberately, turning now & then to peer at the empty track through the large eyeglasses perched askew on her face.

"It's been ten years since that World Trade Center," she said, measuring the weight of each syllable as it left her lips. And so it had been. Ten years before & three thousand miles away I had watched the Twin Towers deflate like a pair of absurd rectangular balloons filled with living, feeling beings.

The bespectacled wanderer dragged herself to the bench &

sat behind me, facing the opposite direction. “It’s been ten years since that World Trade Center,” she said again in just the same cadence, & then three more times for good measure. She was looking for a response to this revelation, a proper course of action. And then she knew what to do. “One of these days,” she proclaimed, “I’ll have to fucking *kill* one of you.” The fellow at the other end of the bench stood abruptly & took a few steps away from the bench. My train burst into the station full of sound & fury like a desperate prayer.



## Exposure

Last night as my epiglottis flopped about in my throat like a dying fish I dreamed I tried to pay you a visit in Hoboken. The events that followed burned themselves photon by photon into the film behind the open shutter of my father's old Pentax MX, but because I could not get the light meter to work & had to guess at everything, the aperture was too narrow, the shutter too quick to capture anything but a murky ghost of the drifter sleeping on the stairway that led from the glass corridor in Port Authority up to some unmarked & god-forsaken employees-only back room. I left the soft early-period Mozart of the terminal, a lullaby for those asleep on its floors. The bus rocketed through the yellowed tile tunnel, the driver's promise to notify me of my stop got lost somewhere in the Hudson, & I tumbled out near the edge of Jersey City. The Pentax fell, the door at the back opened suggestively, & I & my film lay overexposed on the hard & all-too-quiet New Jersey pavement. *What shame*, I thought, *to die like this in the Garden State*. But you revived me, carried me to a 7-11 & poured a mango slushie down my throat. The streets of Hoboken, a hushed, scaled-down mockery of Manhattan, swallowed your purple woolen coat as you turned a corner, desperate to flag down my return bus.

## Speculation on the circumstances of an unpublished novelist

She is back in New York now. There is, as ever, a sharp chill of hunger & impossibility in the autumn winds that push her up & down the East Side.

When a man does not mistake her for a child he usually throws out some kind of intimidating cat-call. Once a man actually purred at her on the sidewalk, like a bona fide house cat falling asleep in a stray patch of sunshine.

This is her last year at the school, & the abysmal specter of her unplanned future howls at her all night. In the daytime she drowns out the sound by the fountain in the park where musicians gather, but her favorite band haven't the money to leave London these days.

An old friend of hers, a marathon runner & a diplomat in training, is just back from Indonesia & China. They meet at a café called Shanghai Cuisine, across the street from the park where the people of Chinatown smoke & argue & inquire after the health of each other's families. Over soup dumplings he speculates worriedly that he is becoming a "gold digger" after a few dates with a man several years his senior who pays for everything. She mentions the handsome asshole from one of her international studies courses who once found a pile of textbooks she'd forgotten & arranged to return them to her in the student lounge.

"I thought, you know, he'd walk in when he said he would,

& we'd see each other right away, & then we'd get married."

But he'd only passed through the room briefly & left her books on an adjacent table. The marathon runner is sympathetic & gracious & glad to see her again but he keeps a tight schedule & has soon disappeared. She lingers, finishing her Tsingtao, then leaves a ten-dollar bill on the table & ambles off toward the uptown 6. As she passes the vendors hawking counterfeit Rolex wristwatches & Louis Vuitton handbags, she pulls her sweater tighter over her shoulders. Winter approaches, & to her winter is the season that starves the subway rats so hard they can eat only each other. The city is cruel, but she must live deliberately & not return to Montana, at least not yet.

## Questions for Miyazawa Kenji

Was the totality of love as you understood it embodied in the croaking of a frog? Did you lie awake some nights asking yourself whether you were a waste of rice? Did you dream always of going away? Did you wish someone sat beside you on the train as it raced toward Sapporo, stood with you on the shore of Karafuto? Did you worry that the first edition of *Spring & Asura* was too short? Did you ever feel the dark forests along the Iwate Light Railway trying to whisper to you, an emptiness in your chest because you couldn't hear what they were saying? Would you have lived longer without tuberculosis, or would you have collapsed from the weight of life anyway? Would you rather Ginsberg translated you than Snyder? If I just think your name in the dark & still myself, will you whisper back & illuminate the way? Was your English as good as they say?

# Chapter 3

Things that never shall  
be

## The Unicorn Tapestries

The Unicorn Tapestries have their own room at the Cloisters. As fascinating as they are, they deserve as much, really. Their history is murky; they were commissioned by some wealthy family or other, & woven by unknown artists, & in an unknown year they were transported from the main villa to the summer home, & that's all I can say about where they came from. I've got my notebook today, so I jot down the name of each tapestry as I find it on the wall.

### “The Unicorn is Found.”

*The unicorn stands by a fountain near the forest's edge, surrounded by dogs & men. It has come from the forest; what on earth could it be seeking here, at this fragment of the stone world, where men carry spears in hopes of piercing its side? Who on earth could it want to meet? Nearby, the stag looks on. It does not fear for its safety; the men, the dogs, they are not here for the stag. They are here for the unicorn.*

I paid two dollars at the desk; it's crowded today, & I've only come to glance at the Unicorn Tapestries, anyway. I'm hiding under hat & hair so nobody realizes I don't know where I'm from anymore. Out on the terrace the sun fries my dermal DNA. On the silhouetted George Washington Bridge there are flying pinpricks of light, the Sun reflected in car windows. From here they are all silent & could nearly be mistaken for embers carried on the wind.

I don't even know why I left Roosevelt Island today & didn't know where I was going until I was almost here. I called a few people but they're all raking leaves or in family engagements. I was hoping today I'd belong to somebody. Instead I'm scribbling alone on a terrace at the Cloisters. I suppose things turned out this way because it's Sunday, & I'm supposed to have something to do now. Some people gain freedom through apostasy. All I got for mine was a lot of purposeless Sundays.

### **“The Unicorn is Attacked.”**

*The dogs have been set upon the unicorn, their jaws set in motion, & the spears are thrust in at it with full force. Blood runs turbidly down the unicorn's sides. The stag has disappeared from view.*

There is something comforting about the Cloisters, & I feel it the moment I see its tower from distance. At first I can't quite put my finger on it, but soon I realize what it is. It's Catholicism—in the very architecture of the place. The soft curves of the terraces, the dark, arched windows.

### **“The Unicorn Defends Itself.”**

*This view is much the same as the last, but the men have retreated a few steps now, as the unicorn has begun to kick for its life, & its horn is buried in one of the attacking dogs. The unicorn may appear to have the advantage here, but the*

*sheer numbers against it & the long, white horn that stands by the fireplace in the room of tapestries say otherwise.*

One Sunday I woke up late. I'd made some mistake with my alarm clock. By the time I made it down to the Chapel of the Good Shepherd, the last Mass of the day had started. At first I prepared myself to go in, & then I just kept walking—down to the subway station where I caught a train to Chinatown.

### **“The Mystical Capture of the Unicorn.”**

*This one is an oddity. A fair lady in red has appeared behind the unicorn, which is still bleeding & beset by dogs. The lady glances slyly over her right shoulder at a hunter who stands beyond the corner of a fence not seen in the other works, sounding his horn. Of this tapestry, only two fragments have survived; the rest is lost.*

Somewhere near the Manhattan Bridge, a door opened onto a red-and-gold chamber, & glancing in at just the right moment as I passed by, I saw a god at the end of the hallway looking right back at me from that dark interior space, I'd been passing long corridors, steps leading to basement shops, & windows with blinds half-drawn for what seemed all morning. And then, without knowing what I was looking for, I'd found it—a faint vision of the resplendent god. The empty MetroCard in my pocket bore a quote from Augustine's *Confessions*:

*Too late I loved you O Beauty ever ancient & ever*



*new! And behold, you were within me, & I out of myself, & there I searched for you.*

So maybe it wasn't selfish after all, this turning inward. But Augustine himself would surely think I'd gone the wrong way. He may be right about that; how could I hope to know, to understand a god, when I do not even know myself?

Any street in Chinatown could be any street in Chinatown. Any street has the same bakeries, the same trinket shops, the same leather purses hanging dimly, thickly, the same dollar dumpling houses & corridors leading gods-know-where. Later, when I told my roommate it's like the landscape of a dream, where every place you go is every place you've been & there are unexplored corners in every direction, he told me it sounded more like a nightmare.

"Dreams, nightmares," I replied. "What's the difference?"

### **"The Unicorn is Killed & Brought to the Castle."**

*In this work the unicorn appears twice—once receiving a death-blow from the hunters' spears, & again, dead & draped over the back of a horse, paraded before the castle & its inhabitants.*

I peered into several more bakeries, looking for the sticky steamed snow-white buns filled with barbecued pork, but in time I realized it wasn't food I was looking for, but rather an escape from the tune in my head—Fleetwood Mac's "Never Going Back Again"—& anyway I had already bought my lunch, so I wandered to a bench near the Grand Street sta-

tion & unwrapped the cold mochi cake I had been carrying in a bright red plastic bag. When I had eaten, I could not remember the taste of the red bean filling. I was feeling low-down, & I was covered in flour—which I imagined made me look a tad Dickensian. Before I headed down to the station, I finished off the can of Thai tea. It was too much cream & sugar, & it made me nauseous, but somewhere in my gut the nausea became guilt, & I tried to imagine what that might be for. *Should have given that man a few dollars for a Metro-Card*, I thought. *Should have looked harder for a job*. But mostly, *Should have been there this morning*. Or *shouldn't have; either way I'm right, & either way I'm dead wrong*.

For the first time I realized that the D train ran express up to the West Side, & I started riding uptown to an old haunt, not so much because I wanted to be there as because I wanted to take the train on & on into the dark, & I didn't know whether I was looking for a god or running away from one, like Noah at sea.

I was bound for the Cloisters, but that day I didn't make it all the way there. That day I climbed up into Fort Tryon Park, sat for a while in the garden, & then retreated to my island.

### **“The Hunters Enter the Woods.”**

*Here the hunters, spears & dogs again at the ready, march of into the dark sea of leaves—but what are they hunting? Isn't the unicorn dead?*

Today, Sunday again, I went in the trains looking for something, but I still don't know for sure what it is. I heard it a few hours ago, when someone in the Union Square station was playing "How Great Thou Art" on a saw. I saw it in the opaque darkness between stations, & in the blue lamps that dot the rails.

Miyazawa Kenji compared the impermanent self to the flickering blue light cast by an alternating-current lamp. When his sister Toshiko died he took a train north & made it as far as the southern shore of Karafuto seeking some kind of solace.

Today I, too, am escaping, & today I, too, am looking for something. Today I make it all the way to the Cloisters. But I still don't know what I'm looking for. Isn't the unicorn dead?

### **"The Unicorn in Captivity."**

*The content of this piece resists attempts to place it in a unified narrative with the others. Here the unicorn stands tethered to a tree in a tiny circular paddock, surrounded by a field of flowers. No other creature—no hunter, lady, dog, or stag—appears beside it. The blood is still there, but the unicorn is quite alive. It stands placid, alone, removed from time & space, eternal & unknowable. Amen.*

**Suicide note which is not really a suicide note, but rather a list of reasons why the author is not yet ready to die**

I'm sorry but I'm tired of pretending I'm not falling in love with the strangers on the F train, of shifting my gaze whenever it's returned, of pretending I don't smell the piss-soaked rags under which someone is sleeping three feet away. I'm sorry but I'm tired of telling myself I'm following the way of Peter Kropotkin every time I decide I don't need to spend the money for lunch. Obviously I'm useless because I'm just making a hole while most people here are making enough money for their own three square meals a day & a little extra for the tornado victims.

I'm sorry but I'm tired of wondering which one of us lost touch, stopped calling. (I'm pretty sure it was me, so don't blame yourself.) Also, the guacamole in the fridge is going bad. Please throw it out.

## Diorama

Holy Saturday. The upper room is locked. The Elián González case is on television. Sunlight shatters any illusion we had that this place can be sealed. I see it all unfolding without motion like a shoebox diorama. Whispers *ad infinitum*: “Were you there?” Urgent, grasping. “Were you there when the sun refused to shine?”

The sun finds an island of negative space in the sea of clouds outside, hurling itself upon the volumes of the *Encyclopedia Americana* I have arranged on the floor of my parents’ bedroom, causing me to tremble.

“...tremble, tremble...”

Or perhaps I am lying by the wall in the school gymnasium, tilting my head so that the ceiling appears far, far below me, & all my friends cling to the floor for dear life.

Or maybe I’m waiting for Dad to run unknown errands, slouching low in his truck, already nauseous from candy buttons & still working my way down the paper strip.

Wherever I appear to be, I am suspended, locked in the upper room.

“Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?”

When I am sure they cannot see me, I tremble, tremble, tremble.

*L'Heure exquise*

Now, brother, we approach that exquisite hour when you shall render unto the vending machine what is George Washington's & retreat to the window with your bag of chips to exercise the essential human function of conscious emptiness. It is in this most exquisite hour, dear brother, that you are most aware of the enormous space between your neurons, which is the same as the enormous space between celestial bodies.

## Genealogy

If you want to find out what kind of family I come from, you need only talk to a few people. The things they will say are related to me. I'm related to them; they, these things that are said, are my family. If you press on long enough ("enough" being for a very long time, as my forefathers believed you should never hire a farmhand if you could breed one) you'll run out of living people & be forced to either give up or turn to the written words of the dead. If you turn to the written words of the dead, you'll soon find that they are all written in French.

If you go back further you'll find all the words are not only in French, but in France, & then in Latin, & then there may be no words at all. If you go back quite far enough you will find primates who thought themselves somehow special, as I imagine every primate does, but didn't have the words to express their fundamental specialness, & therefore spent most of their waking hours focusing on the more important business of finding grubs.

So everything is owed, you see, to the introduction of words. (The internal combustion engine is also of some importance.)

## Why I write short things

Breaking news: Somewhere in the world, probably in China, a child is writing the most beautiful thing ever written. Everywhere in the world, crouched on staircase landings, back porches, & tree stumps, squinting through all shades of light, people are writing poems, stories, Russian-size novels. There is no way all the worthwhile work can be published. And we will never have the time to read it all.



## Hey there, empty notebook!

Reacquainting myself with what it's like to be out of the house & pulling the strands of sunlight onto paper. Curious. Curious how the waves break even when it's just my pale body standing alone out here to face them. Sorry about last night, man. Was there in spirit. Wasn't anywhere last night except in spirit. Music takes the body away on summer nights like that. I know you tried my phone but what you should have tried was mediumship or the Jimi Hendrix Experience. Been playing a pixelated discontinued handheld console RPG & thinking what it must have been like for my alter ego growing up in green Chugoku, hiking alone with one of those boxy leather satchels, catching bioluminescent things on warm mosquito netting nights, & trading them for imported American vinyl. I look up & see the cottonwood blossoms of my imaginary trans-Pacific childhood. I look up again & burn great black holes in my eyes from the sun. I look up *again* in the dictionary & it says if I really want to know what *again* means I should ask you.

## The scent of Ramune

The sixth grade field trip to the International District came on a sharp autumn morning when I had a heavy cold, & as we walked down a narrow side street that filtered the sunlight just so, he taught me how to breathe in sharply so all the excess mucus ran into the back of my throat. The class chaperons herded us into a dark hole in the side of the building which turns out to be full of fish tanks. Carp & more complicated sea beasts eyed us suspiciously for a few minutes as we made the rounds.

I followed him very closely & sometimes clumsily stepped on the heels of his shoes & was amazed that he didn't mind. He was wearing black shoes with purple laces, because his father wanted him to wear at least one article of clothing that wasn't black. His red viking hair glowed around the edges, tufts of it oscillating in every breeze.

I lost him for a while when we toured the museum, but afterwards he found me & we perused the long produce aisles of Uwajimaya together & savored the diverse colors & scripts of the packaged snacks & dry goods. I bought a can of guava nectar & a carton of *kau cim* sticks, while you saved your pocket money for a package of brush pens from the adjacent Kinokuniya bookstore.

We sat at the same round table in the function room over a busy restaurant, a dusty room of brass & red velvet that seemed to have been asleep until we entered it. He chuckled as I greedily took cup after cup of hot tea, perhaps because the pleasure of clearing my sinuses was plainly written on my

face.

One of the last times I saw him, we returned to the International District & bought strawberry Pocky & bottles of Ramune at Uwajimaya. When I couldn't open my bottle, he chided me teasingly & did it for me.

For a long time I thought I missed him, & perhaps I did, but at some point I realized that what I missed most wasn't him, or the International District. It was a sort of intangible substance that formed in the air around us when we were together, something like the scent of Ramune. I even buy a bottle of the stuff now & then, but the similarity is only strong enough to make me wish I didn't remember.

## A red gel

She once borrowed a library videotape, *Le mystère Picasso*, in which a hairy, wrinkled old man emerged, vulnerable—nascent, even—from the womb of impenetrable darkness into a small orb of light illuminating for the camera a stool & a blank canvas. The cosmological tradition she trusts most holds that the mother of all is a black hole. In the darkened theater she & her lover lie under the stage apron, head-to-head, half-sleeping. Roger Ebert said in his commentary on Ozu's *Floating Weeds* that the Japanese language has a word signifying an empty space waiting to be filled. In this darkness before the final rehearsal she is reborn, her whole being engaged in the act of becoming. When nobody is looking, she attaches a red gel to the spotlight, so when it first lights the stage, bringing the whole world into existence for the first time, everything is red, virile. She throws her head back & laughs.

## Videotape

The end of the era of videotape had very unfortunate implications. The whole island used to huddle in cold brick houses, the dark wooden doors snug in their joints to keep out the rain, the rain & ocean spray petulantly slapping the roofs.

Ewan was in the cellar with his new beige plastic keyboard that played itself beautifully if one just pressed the bright orange rubber button labeled DEMO. Upstairs, the telephone, an old rotary thing of which Josie was terribly embarrassed, rang three times before she got up from her reading to answer. Susan was on the other end & couldn't get her television set working. Josie tried to downplay her enthusiasm as she invited Susan over for the program. She hung up & stood idly for a moment, smiling to herself. A windowpane rattled. She put the kettle on.

It was certainly darkening outside, but the streetlights hadn't been lit yet, so Susan kept a brisk pace & sung aloud until she reached Number Fourteen. Nobody came to the door for a few minutes, so she spent some time marveling at how soggy & abandoned everything was from the outside.

Ewan was called up from the cellar before the program started, & sat cross-legged on the floor in the glow of the screen. Susan & Josie shared the sofa behind him & stopped talking as soon as the first notes from the BBC Radiophonic Workshop sounded.

Ewan went to bed as soon as the program was over. The other two watched a report from Belfast. Every time a light

passed by the camera it left a pale red streak across the screen. Such was the medium of videotape. Mum & Dad would not be home until the next afternoon. Susan fell asleep with her head on Josie's shoulder. The storm lifted. Everything took on a delicious sort of softness before Josie fell asleep.

THE END

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